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SUBJECT: SHEIKH OMAR AL JABOURI WANTS TO BE THE NEXT SUNNI
HEAVYWEIGHT

Classified By: Deputy Political Counselor Greg D'Elia for reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (C) Summary: On May 20, PolOff, EPRT-2 Team Leader and CF met with Sunni leader Sheikh Omar al Jabouri (SOAJ) in order to discuss the founding of the Independent National Tribal Gathering (INTG), upcoming provincial elections and his break from the Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP). SOAJ explained that frustration with IIP leadership and the desire to capitalize on the success of the Sahwa movement were the reasons for establishing INTG. INTG plans to utilize tribal ties to create a grassroots movement across sectarian lines, that would rely heavily on local leadership to make inroads in the upcoming elections at the provincial, district and neighborhood levels. INTG's platform remains unclear, but anti-corruption and reconciliation were reoccurring themes in the discussion. End Summary.

¶2. (C) The Iraq High Electoral Commission (IHEC) approved the establishment of the Independent National Tribal Gathering on May 5 for the upcoming 2008 provincial elections. (Comment: There is some ambiguity as to the proper English translation of this organization, primarily the word association vs. gathering. Association has organizational overtones, whereas gathering implies a traditional sheikh-like group. SOAJ and his aides used the term "gathering" and commented that the key point is that INTG not be referred to as a political party, since Iraqis have become disillusioned with that term. End Comment) The founders' notion of a tribal-based political movement has been brewing since 2006, according to SOAJ, but only gained momentum after a large groups of sheikhs met with President Talabani and Vice President Hashimi four months ago. INTG has set up headquarters in a palatial hall situated in an affluent neighborhood of the Mansour District in western Baghdad. SOAJ presented INTG's logo and brochures in Arabic and English.

¶3. (C) Frustration with IIP leadership and personal ambition appear to have been the deciding factors in establishing INTG. SOAJ began the meeting by citing the lack of progress on reconciliation as justification for establishing INTG and as a continuing source of discontent with the Government of Iraq (GOI) and the IIP. He later candidly stated his personal reasons for accepting a leadership position with the INTG, explaining that, despite several years of IIP activity, he had little hope of rising in the party ranks since others had 10 to 15 years seniority.

¶4. (C) SOAJ explained that INTG's election strategy will be to: capitalize on the Sahwa movement's success as a tribal-based model for achieving security and reconciliation; include/incorporate the Shia members of tribes into its constituency; only select candidates who have remained in Iraq; and aggressively campaign for representation at all levels of government. SOAJ believes that the Sahwa movement demonstrated to Iraqis the effectiveness of the tribes in tackling difficult issues such as security and reconciliation. INTG hopes to capitalize on its credibility as a tribal-based organization and offer voters an attractive

alternative to formal political parties. Another electoral tactic will be to bring Shia tribes into the fold. In contrast to the IIP, INTG plans to welcome both Sunni and Shia in its ranks, thereby broadening their support. INTG intends to generate grass roots support by choosing candidates who possess a working knowledge of their communities as opposed to those sheikhs who had previously fled abroad and had little more than a titular link to their communities. SOAJ explained that in the course of the last five years, party politics had marginalized many competent Iraqis from neighborhood, district and provincial government.

INTG plans to encourage its members to engage at all levels of government, thereby guaranteeing the delivery of essential services through vertical integration.

15. (C) Initially, INTG will focus on campaigning in Baghdad Province. If successful, INTG would expand its efforts to Babil, South Diyala, Kirkuk and Salah ad Din. To date INTG public announcements have been intentionally muted in an effort to avoid becoming another flash-in-the-pan political initiative. SOAJ listed three elements necessary for INTG's sustainable success: leadership, community support, and financial staying power; SOAJ claims INTG has the first two in hand and is working on the third. SOAJ's staff aide pledged to organize a kick off rally with some 25,000 participants.

16. (C) Comment: Sheikh Omar al Jabouri is a charismatic leader; if INTG successfully mobilizes and unites tribal support, including its Shia elements, it is possible that INTG could become a strong political contender in the upcoming Baghdad provincial elections. One big question is

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whether the talk about including Shia representatives of the tribes is more than just that; one of SOAJ's aides candidly acknowledged that INTG was heavily Sunni. INTG's potential voter base puts it in direct competition with the IIP. SOAJ's statement that he can no longer serve as Vice President Hashimi's (IIP) advisor for human rights, indicates that the IPP views INTG as a credible threat. (Note: When asked directly what his plans were, SOAJ suggested he might join the staff of President Talabani. End Note).

17. (C) Comment cont'd: EPRT-2 and its embedded Brigade, like most other EPRT-Brigade tandems in Baghdad, has been meeting regularly since last fall with SOAJ and a group of representatives of Sunni enclaves in eastern Baghdad, in the framework of a "reconciliation" initiative under the umbrella of VP Hashimi. It had already become clear that the primary purpose for SOAJ of these meetings was to develop and maintain a strong relationship with the U.S., rather than to pursue real Sunni-Shia reconciliation. With SOAJ's transition to a new role as political party leader, our dialogue with him can no longer be considered a reconciliation initiative, although we intend to maintain the relationship. However, we will continue to work with the group of Sunni representatives in eastern Baghdad on several local reconciliation projects that we hope will bear fruit. End Comment.

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